Review


Trevor Griffiths’ *The Cinema and Cinema-Going in Scotland* plugs a significant scholarly gap and provides a much needed social, economic cultural history of cinema-going in Scotland. This gap is all the more surprising given that, as Griffith’s reminds us, cinema going had particular importance to Scots. There were more cinemas and cinema seats per head of population in Scotland than in the rest of Britain, and a distinctive structure of film exhibition, distribution and production developed there. This work aims to recover this distinctive experience and, importantly, places it within a broader framework of social, economic and cultural change. The book covers the period from the emergence of cinema in existing leisure forms at the end of the nineteenth century, through its growth during the first and second world wars, and to the heights of popularity in the late 1940s.

Griffiths’ impressive work challenges existing scholarship on the spread of cinema, audience responses to it and the very nature of audiences in several important ways. One basic aim is to enable a more complete national history of cinema in Britain, by taking the focus of scholarship away from its early concern with London, and providing a case study of the part of Britain with the most ardent film goers. Griffiths also challenges the relationship between the early spread of cinema and the growth of ‘modernity’, by which is normally meant the development of new, ‘standardised’ cultural forms created for a new urban population—a new ‘mass culture.’ As he points out, Scotland was a country regarded as largely ‘rural’ in character, and yet cinema blossomed here, largely because it was able to spread via
existing patterns of leisure and entertainment. Moreover, he challenges the view that a monolithic ‘mass culture’ emerged via cinema – and highlights distinctive Scottish responses to the new media form. Indeed, one of the key strengths of this work is that it carefully builds up a sense of the multiplicity of audiences, outlining the factors determining their tastes and investigating the ever-changing process of negotiation between picture houses and audiences. Furthermore, Griffiths outlines the retention of an abiding sense of ‘locality’, and the importance of cinema in creating and reflecting images of Scotland. Whilst the key focus of the book is exhibition and reception, the book does also investigate Scottish film production. Here Griffiths provides fascinating insights into the changing nature of Scottish national identity. He challenges the view that images of Scotland on film were ‘outdated’ or ‘anti-modern,’ arguing that they were actually far more diverse than previously thought. However, Griffiths does highlight the very real concern at the influence of ‘outside cultural forces’ (from England and the US) being spread by cinema. In addition, as part of re-discovering a distinctive Scottish cinematic experience, Griffiths highlights distinctive Scottish responses to cinema in the sphere of regulation and the fear of secularisation.

Griffiths sources are both diverse and innovative using the records from individual cinemas, legal records, official publications, local newspapers and the Scottish Screen Archive, amongst others. *Cinema and Cinema-Going in Scotland* is a hugely impressive, detailed piece of scholarship. It should be recommended not only to Scottish historians but also to cinema historians everywhere, to social and cultural historians, and to those interested in national identity in twentieth century Scotland, and Britain.

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